



Assessing Change

You've been for counselling and you are not sure if it is working. Part of you feels nothing has changed and another part feels like something is different. You are probably right on both counts.

Most folks when seeking change look for dramatic differences. When results are not seen or considered significant enough, some feel hopeless and perhaps give up. Many tend to concentrate on only one aspect of change. Hang in and learn to assess change more broadly. Here is what you need to know.

Change actually occurs in several dimensions: intensity, duration and frequency.

Intensity refers to the strength of behaviour. A slight emotion is manageable whereas an intense emotion may be overwhelming. A child may cry or whine and at other times may tantrum, flopping to the ground wailing. These are examples of different levels of intensity or strength of behaviour.

Duration refers to the length of behaviour or how long the behaviour lasts. One can feel sad for a day or a week or longer. A tantrum can last a minute or an hour. These are examples of different durations or length of behaviour.

Frequency refers to how often behaviour occurs or how many times in a given period the behaviour is experienced. Tantrums may occur daily or weekly. Depression may come and go cyclically or in some cases may persist so as to be perceived as steady. These are examples of differences in frequency or how often a given behaviour occurs.

The key to assessing change then, is to determine along all three dimensions if something is different and understanding that change does not always occur equally across all three dimensions.

For example, a child tantrums. Parents use a time-out procedure to address the tantrum behaviour. Over time, the frequency of tantrums, how often they occur, goes down, but the intensity, the strength and even the duration of the tantrum remains. The parents feel frustrated, believing nothing has changed. However,

when reviewing frequency, it is detectable that the actual number of incidents has diminished. Parents are encouraged to stay the course and over time, while intensity or duration may never change, the frequency can continue to decline to the point where the child stops tantruming. Goal met.

In another situation, a person feels depressed. With treatment and over time, the patient still feels down and thus believes the treatment is not working. However, when gauging the intensity of depression on a ten-point scale, the person sees that whereas before treatment the intensity was rated a nine, with treatment, the intensity has reduced to a five. The difference, while not all the way better, also made the difference between thinking of suicide and being able to cope and manage daily living. Thus the person is encouraged to continue treatment in view of clear change.

While most folks would like to see behaviour improve in all three dimensions equally, this doesn't always happen. Behaviour may improve in one or several dimensions at different rates. The key is to carefully assess change across all dimensions to best determine if change is actually occurring. Focusing on only one dimension can provide the misguided impression that nothing has changed when indeed it may have. If things are changing, then stay the course. Expect and plan for some setbacks along the way. If it feels like change follows the two-steps forward and one-step back path, the good news is things are still moving ahead when you look at the entire course and not just the step back.

Perspective is everything when assessing change. Hopefully the above will help you keep a broader perspective when determining change and keep you from feeling discouraged. Hang in. Things may indeed be changing!

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.